

A Brief History of Referendums in Greater Victoria by Ross Crockford

Canada's federal government has only held three national referendums in our nation's entire history, on prohibition (1898), military conscription (1942), and the constitution-altering Charlottown Accord (1992). Among the provinces, British Columbia has been keen to use referendums, holding at least 13 since B.C.'s founding, including votes on prohibition (1916), public health insurance (1937), and whether to give citizens the power to recall MLAs and initiate legislation (1991). In May 2009, British Columbians will vote on whether to switch their electoral system to one of proportional representation determined by single-transferable vote.

The greatest use of direct democracy in Canada, however, has been at the municipal level of government. Victoria was once at the forefront of this movement.

For most of B.C.'s history, provincial law required municipalities to get taxpayer approval whenever they borrowed money. Consequently, many of the referendums in Victoria were votes on major capital projects that determined the course of development of the city. In 1998, the province amended the *Local Government Act* to allow municipalities to borrow up to the equivalent of 20% of the total assessed value of the land within its boundaries, effectively eliminating the need for many referendum questions.

Currently, municipalities are given wide discretion about whether to put questions to their voters. Municipal councils may seek "community opinion" on any matter, under s. 83 of the *Community Charter* (http://www.qp.gov.bc.ca/statreg/stat/c/03026_04.htm#part4_division1), but there are few situations in which they are required to do so, or in which that opinion has any binding effect. (By definition such a vote is a plebiscite, not a referendum, which is binding upon a government.) A rare exception is the "counter-petition" process described in s. 86: if a municipal council passes a controversial bylaw and 10% of eligible voters sign a petition to have it revoked, then the bylaw must be approved by referendum.

(In 1990, the Kootenay town of Rossland passed a bylaw enabling citizens to rewrite *any* bylaw if 20% of eligible electors signed a petition demanding a referendum on the matter. Many critics said this violated provincial law because it meant voters could prevent their council from acting when it was legally required to do so. Rossland voters only used the bylaw twice, to force referendums on council salary increases, before the town council repealed it in 2005.)

The following is a list of the referendums held in greater Victoria over the past century. The city certainly held such votes before 1908 – in 1887, for example, residents agreed to buy a collection of books from the Mechanics' Institute, leading to beginning of Victoria's first public library – but indexes of newspapers before 1901 are incomplete, making such research difficult. (A selective index of papers from 1862 to 1921 is at <http://web.uvic.ca/vv/newspaper/index.php>)

January 16, 1908: Victoria residents approve bylaws to get the city's water supply from Sooke Lake (1,357 votes to 609 against), and to buy an incinerator for the city (1,178 to 589).

January 13, 1909: Victorians vote on two bylaw and two referendum questions, agreeing to sewer improvements (many of the city's current pipes date to this decision) and a ban on Sunday shopping, but turn down making \$85,000 alterations to city hall and granting \$7,500 to the local tourist association.

January 12, 1911: Five bylaws and three referendum questions are presented to Victoria voters. They approve of acquiring further water rights at Sooke Lake, burying the downtown's telephone lines underground, turning the jobs of police commissioner and licence commissioner into elected positions, and changing the liquor laws so that retail booze may only be sold by hotels. They reject a proposal for a new theatre, to be built by Simon Leiser, at the site of today's Crystal Gardens.

January 14, 1920: Victorians vote 2,986 to 445 in favour of construction of today's Johnson Street Bridge, enabling direct railway access to downtown. A proposal to buy land from the Hudson's Bay Company for a public golf course fails to get enough votes to reach the required 60% majority. (Today that land is the Uplands Golf Club.) Victorians also vote for a "commission" form of municipal government, using proportional representation, but the results are not binding.

December 8, 1927: Victorians approve upgrades to the Ogden Point grain terminal, and authorize a financial guarantee for construction of a textile mill on Montreal Street.

December 12, 1935: Victorians turn down a proposal to switch to daylight savings time (1,943 in favor to 2,625 against) because neither Vancouver or Seattle have instituted it, even though many citizens expressed a desire for "more leisure during the hours of daylight."

December 8, 1938: Victorians approve borrowing \$150,000 from the Dominion government for construction of a civic auditorium and sports arena, and agree to continue streetcar service in the city for another five years.

December 10, 1943: Oak Bay residents reject chlorination of their municipal water.

December 15, 1944: Victorians approve spending \$150,000 to build Memorial Arena after the Willows Arena burned down earlier in the year.

July 26, 1946: Victorians approve spending \$108,000 on waterworks improvement and \$108,000 on street lighting, but turn down a bylaw to authorize sale of the Willows fairgrounds to Colwood Park Racing Association for \$100,000 (12.3% voter turnout).

December 12, 1946: Victorians reject a plan to replace the city's streetcars with buses. Oak Bay votes in favour of spending \$65,000 to buy Uplands Park and Cattle Point.

June 19, 1947: Victoria, Saanich, Oak Bay and Esquimalt residents approve a new transit scheme removing the city's streetcars and replacing them with buses. The votes total 11,847 in favour to 1,225 opposed.

December 4, 1947: Victorians approve construction of a new city hall in the block bounded by Blanshard, Cormorant, and Pandora. (They were also given the option of a location at Quadra and Cook). Victorians also approve negotiations to amalgamate with other municipalities (6,097 votes to 585) and agree, along with Oak Bay and Saanich voters, in favour of formation of a metropolitan water board.

December 18, 1948: Saanich voters shoot down a proposal to turn the Gordon Head military base (today's UVic campus) into an "airpark" for light planes, 3,437 votes to 1,706. Oak Bay residents approve spending \$120,000 to buy the Willows fairgrounds.

December 8, 1949: Victorians approve creation of the position of city manager, and spending \$350,000 for renovations to the Carnegie Library.

December 13, 1951: Victorians vote 7,056 to 1,499 to reduce the number of city councillors from 10 to eight.

December 14, 1952: Saanich voters approve construction of a \$2.5-million race track and exhibition buildings in the Strawberry Vale area.

December 15, 1956: Voters in four municipalities turn down a \$5.6-million school construction program. Saanich also votes in favour of refinancing its waterworks, and building another library. Oak Bay approves construction of a new municipal hall and bans the sale of raw milk

December 12, 1957: Victorians approve a new library agreement with surrounding municipalities, and establishment of a royal commission on amalgamation. The *Colonist* notes that "The Junior Chamber of Commerce asked for the referendum and sought referendums in adjoining municipalities too. But when the municipal councils hung back and rejected the idea, the junior chamber indicated it would seek to obtain names on petitions for a royal commission through the area, and take the petitions directly to the government."

December 11, 1958: Victorians vote 3,992 to 1,994 in favour of negotiating amalgamation with Saanich, but Saanich residents are 65% opposed, 5,090 votes to 2,731. Victorians also approve construction of the View Street parkade and pedestrian malls. "This bylaw will insure the future health of our city," says mayor Percy Scurrah, "and it places us first in Canada to install malls and among the leaders in this field on the North American continent."

December 10, 1959: Although numerous dentists call for adding fluoride to the city's water, Victorians vote against it, 6,833 to 4,031. A week later, Saanich, Esquimalt and Oak Bay residents also refuse fluoridation.

December 7, 1961: Saanich approves sale of beer by the glass. (A previous vote failed in 1954.) Sidney residents vote to extend the town's boundaries.

December 7, 1962: An amalgamation referendum fails in Saanich again, but by a smaller margin than in 1958, with 55% against. (Mount Tolmie, Cadboro Bay and Gordon Head neighbourhoods vote in favour, but north and western districts of Saanich are strongly opposed.) Central Saanich

approves spending \$40,000 to build a new municipal hall. Sidney approves more boundary extensions and a waterfront park dedication, but rejects a regional library.

December 14, 1962: Victorians approve spending \$950,000 to create the Centennial Square civic plaza, including renovations of city hall, conversion of the Pantages Theatre (now the Macpherson Playhouse), and construction of a seniors' centre (Silver Threads).

December 13, 1963: Victorians approve the \$375,000 reconstruction of the Fisgard Street police station.

December 13, 1964: Esquimalt residents vote 1,137 to 351 in favour of amalgamating the "panhandle" region of View Royal into their municipality, even though people living there vow to fight it.

June 18, 1965: North Saanich residents approve beer parlours, cocktail lounges and liquor in restaurants and dining rooms. The referendum stems from an application for full liquor privileges by the Deep Cove Chalet.

December 11, 1965: Voters in five out of the region's seven incorporated municipalities reject creation of a regional hospital district, limiting the power of the new Capital Regional District. Oak Bay residents vote 58% in favour of fluoridation of their water, not enough to pass the 60% requirement.

December 11, 1966: Oak Bay votes 52.3% in favour of fluoridation of its water, again not enough to pass. Residents of View Royal's "panhandle" reject amalgamation with Esquimalt. Sooke voters approve spending \$2 million on school construction.

December 9, 1968: Saanich voters approve year-round weekly garbage collection.

December 6, 1969: Citizens of Esquimalt, Oak Bay, Saanich and Victoria approve of paid-admission sport and entertainment being allowed on Sundays. Oak Bay voters approve construction of a new recreation centre.

December 14, 1970: Victorians reject spending \$2 million to buy waterfront land on Wharf Street, allowing the controversial Reid Centre development to continue. Colwood voters reject a proposed ice arena. Sidney voters reject a \$40,000 swimming pool but approves a \$55,000 seniors' centre.

November 29, 1971: Saanich voters approve an increase of municipal grants to local tourist promotion agencies. Sidney authorizes Sunday sports and entertainment.

November 20, 1978: Saanich voters approve construction of an industrial park, choosing Royal Oak over Interurban as a preferable area. Colwood, Langford, and Metchosin residents vote against incorporating their districts as municipalities.

November 15, 1980: After the province leaves it up to municipalities to determine their own “blue laws,” Saanich voters turn down Sunday shopping (7,158 votes to 5,704) while Central Saanich, Colwood, Esquimalt, Langford, Metchosin, Sidney, Sooke and View Royal residents all vote in favour.

May 3, 1981: Victorians vote 71% in favour (8,488 to 3,438) of Sunday shopping (29.4% turnout).

November 23, 1981: Saanich voters approve construction of a new police building, and changes to garbage pickup. Oak Bay residents agree to allow Sunday shopping.

November 20, 1982: Saanich, Oak Bay and Victoria residents all vote overwhelmingly in favour of telling the federal government to push for global nuclear disarmament, following similar municipal referendums across Canada. Victorians also approve borrowing \$21 million for a major update of its underground services and roads. Saanich voters reject a bid to change the garbage collection system. East Sooke voters turn down an \$80,000 firehall for their community.

November 18, 1989: Victorians vote 56% against a \$54-million capital works program that would include a new police station, firehall, and upgrades to City Hall and Memorial Arena.

November 21, 1992: In the most famous referendum in local history, capital region voters are given three options for sewage treatment: A) source control, at the annual taxpayer cost of \$4 per \$100,000 of assessed property; B) primary treatment at \$231 per; or C) secondary treatment at \$336 per. Option A gets 17,713 votes, B gets 6,563 and C gets 6,857. Victorians also vote in favour of building a new \$18.5-million police station and spending \$6.15-million to prevent shoreline erosion, but oppose \$9-million in upgrades to City Hall, Memorial Arena, Crystal Pool and Craigdarroch Castle.

June 13, 1999: Sooke residents agree to incorporate as a municipality (40% turnout).

November 21, 1999: Voters in six CRD municipalities agree in a plebiscite to a 10-year, \$10-per household levy to acquire regional parkland. North Saanich residents approve connecting to a new peninsula sewer system.

December 7, 2001: Western Communities voters reject borrowing \$8.5-million for water system upgrades (less than 10% turnout).

April 20, 2002: Victorians vote 71.5% in favour of replacing Memorial Arena, borrowing \$30 million and creating a partnership with RG Properties to build a new arena (27.65% turnout). Oak Bay voters approve borrowing \$4.6 million for upgrades to the Oak Bay recreation centre.

November 16, 2002: Colwood and Langford residents approve a \$12.8-million Westshore arena, but Metchosin voters reject it, killing the plan. (The region quickly regroups and builds Bear Mountain Arena for \$10.5 million.)

October 5, 2003: Esquimalt voters approve upgrades to the municipality’s sewers.

December 13, 2003: Sooke approves borrowing \$8.8 million for sewers and secondary sewage treatment

June 19, 2004: Sidney rejects spending \$800,000 to put power lines underground along a five-block section of Lochside Drive (10% turnout).

November 6, 2004: North Saanich residents approve of putting slot machines at Sandown Raceway, voting 2,102 to 1,641 (48% turnout).

January 23, 2005: Sooke voters reject spending \$2.6 million to upgrade roads.

November 19, 2005: Langford residents reject borrowing \$750,000 to build a public outdoor ice rink at Bear Mountain, but approve borrowing \$750,000 to equip the new Happy Valley elementary school and the new Eagle Ridge Arena as emergency reception centres, and borrowing \$1.9 million for soccer fields and softball diamonds in the new City Centre Park. Sooke voters approve annexation of Kemp Lake and Gillespie Road areas. Sidney and North Saanich voters agree to borrow \$2.5 million to upgrade the Panorama rec centre. Sidney residents vote in favour of slot machines at Sandown.

November 15, 2008: Central Saanich voters decide whether to contribute to expansion of the Panorama rec centre. Colwood and Langford residents vote on whether the provincial government should pay for upgrades to the E&N railway tracks. West Shore residents vote on whether to spend \$10 million for improvements to the Juan de Fuca rec centre.

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